

Long Read: As in 1968, in 2020 Americans face a defining choice



More than fifty years ago a US presidential election was similarly marked by protests over racial inequality. [Effie Pedaliu](#) writes that in 1968, following the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, Americans came face to face with the country's inability to build an equitable and racially harmonious society, and chose the Republican, Richard Nixon to be president. She argues that despite his rhetoric, the COVID-19 pandemic means that 2020 is not a Nixonian moment for Donald Trump.

As in 1968, in 2020 Americans are faced with a hard and potentially life-defining choice. During this US presidential election year, events in the US have filled streets around the world with protesters at a time when people are supposed to be fighting the COVID-19 pandemic through social distancing. The protests bring to mind those of 1968, also a presidential election year when the campaign was paralleled by unrest.

On 5 June 1968, the Democratic presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. He was the Senator for New York, the 64th US Attorney General and brother of the slain 35th President, John F. Kennedy. Only two months earlier, on 4 April, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, the clergyman, civil right activist, and only the second African-American to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, had also been murdered in cold blood. Both killings exposed an America almost at war with itself.

The causes and backgrounds of agitation between then and now are different, but race and racism are the thread that unites them. Then, anger was stirred by the Vietnam War and racial discrimination. The demonstrations now are the result of police brutality and the actions of Derek Chauvin that led to the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, turning millions of people around the world into eyewitnesses to murder. Chauvin is now facing trial for second degree murder. Once again, America has come face to face with its inability to build an equitable and racially harmonious society.

Civil rights and the lead up to 1968 election

Probably the greatest difference between then and now was the recognition then of what was wrong and a desire to put to right rather than gloss over it or throw bombastic rhetoric at it. The 1960s were a period of profound social discord but also an era during which radical legislation was enacted to deal with historical injustice and create a more equitable society. President Lyndon B. Johnson knew that civil rights was '[an idea whose time had come](#)'. On 2 July 1964, he signed the Civil Rights Act (CRA), which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed and in 1968, only six days after King's assassination, the Fair Housing Act.

Despite the passage of civil rights legislation, ultimately, Johnson failed to address the expectations of the African-Americans of the American North – who had the vote and could find employment but were trapped in 'black ghettos' with decreasing opportunities as whites retreated to white-only suburbs.

To address systemic inequality and exclusion, Johnson's legislative framework had to appeal to Middle America and also ensure it did not create resentment. It needed, basically, to have gone hand in hand with his 'Great Society' program – but it was stalled by the cost of the war in Vietnam and protest against it, which by 1966 had spread outside of university campuses and entered American homes, dividing families. Under the pressure of these events, the Democratic Party itself split into warring factions. For white Middle America this was a time of deep uneasiness and this resulted in a white backlash.



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On 1 February, Richard M. Nixon, President Eisenhower's Vice President, announced that he would again seek the Republican presidential nomination. He would run under the banner 'Bring Us Together' targeting the votes of the predominantly white 'silent majority'. On 16 March 1968, Robert Kennedy, after much prevarication that had won him taunts like 'Kennedy: Hawk, Dove – or *Chicken*' [entered the race for Democratic nomination](#), announcing his candidacy with the words: 'I do not run for the presidency merely to oppose any man ... I run to seek new policies – policies to end the bloodshed in Vietnam and in our cities, policies to close the gaps that now exist between black and white, between rich and poor, between young and old, in this country and around the rest of the world'. On 31 March 1968, incumbent President Lyndon Johnson conceded his own defeat to the Vietnam War by announcing that he would not seek re-election for a second term.

The 1968 election

The 1968 election campaign was dominated by two themes: how to end the war in Vietnam and how to implement draconian law enforcement in America's inner cities. Kennedy chose to run on a platform of conciliation and tolerance. For him America's problems stemmed from a moral decay and he felt that 'the national soul of the United States was at stake'. He chose as a motto George Bernard Shaw's words: 'there are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?'

He was prepared to acknowledge his and his brother's roles over Vietnam, but asserted the future ought not be hostage to the past or, as he put it, 'past error is no excuse for its own perpetuation'. Even though he was part of the Democratic Party establishment, he was also in tune with those who demanded social justice and better race relations. Kennedy seemed to be able to bridge the chasm between black and white America and he emerged as the 'unity' candidate.

He showed his mettle on 4 April 1968, the day Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, by James Earl Ray, a fugitive from Missouri State Prison. On that day, at a pre-election rally in Indianapolis, Indiana, Kennedy addressed a predominantly African-American crowd. They learnt of the terrible events in Memphis from him. He proceeded to give a largely improvised [speech](#), stating, 'What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black... We can do well in this country.' Elsewhere in America that night, black anger and despair sent many an inner city up in flames, but Indianapolis remained peaceful.

RFK and the death of a 'dream'

The contrast with today could not be more dramatic. President Trump has decided to face domestic discord with divisive messages that could have had an incendiary effect at a moment when Minneapolis was burning. He proclaimed himself as 'Your President of Law and Order', threatened to call in the National Guard and to evoke the 'Insurrection Act'. Peaceful demonstrators at Lafayette Square were teargassed to enable him to visit St John's Episcopal Church to brandish the Bible. This prompted his own Secretary of Defence, Mark Esper, to [advise caution](#) over deploying troops in the US; and the highly decorated retired US Marine Corps General and the 26th US Secretary of Defence, James Mattis, a man who has a deep understanding of history to write that President Trump was 'the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people'. Mattis went on to call for '[mature leadership](#)'.

On 5 June 1968, following his victory in the California primary, Robert Kennedy was killed by Sirhan Sirhan, a 24-year-old Palestinian migrant who shot him at nearly point blank range in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Some commentators have described his death as the death of the dream for a fairer, gentler America more at peace with itself and the birth of a more violent and darker US. That it had come just two months after Martin Luther King's murder exacerbated America's self-doubts and led many Americans to conclude that violence permeated American politics and society. Both men had sought change and both ended up dead. National optimism and self-confidence plummeted inexorably.

If Robert Kennedy's assassination shattered the dream of American liberalism, it also left the forces of the American right much stronger as the 'silent majority' sought out what it desperately craved – security, normalcy and a return to how things used to be. Americans, eventually, chose Nixon and they got more than they had bargained for.

The choice facing Americans in 2020

Since 1968, race issues and race relations have made huge strides. There is a sizable and growing African-American middle class. In 2008, Americans elected twice, as their 44th President, Barack Obama, an African-American. Progress however has not brought equality for many. Race relations legislation has failed to address the situation of those Americans who, over the years, have become trapped in urban poverty and who still suffer racism, unemployment, police brutality and segregated schools that nominally are not segregated.

That knee on George Floyd's neck and his dying words 'I can't breathe' have captured the attention of nearly everyone irrespective of color. His death came at an emotionally charged moment in the middle of a respiratory pandemic, high unemployment and a growing uncertainty that is affecting practically everyone. COVID-19 has revealed the inadequacies of the American health and social security system as well as abysmal levels of social inequality. African-Americans are likely to die of COVID-19 at three times the rate of white people and the link here seems to be deprivation. The events in Minneapolis have highlighted the fact that the sixth most common cause of death among black men in the US is the police. This time, though, there were no words of solace like Kennedy's to calm hurt, but just bluster and divisive rhetoric.

Although [80 percent of Americans feel currently that things are out of control](#), this is not a Nixonian moment for President Trump. Nixon had the knack of listening and deciphering correctly the mood of the electorate. President Trump has fallen into a common trap for politicians who think that pandemics are like wars. Though both pose enormous challenges to governments and offer to politicians the opportunity for sensational rhetoric, they act in dissimilar ways. Wars are won by fighting and killing and usually, they bring unity on the domestic front. Pandemics can die down only by saving life and this cannot be achieved through incendiary language but only through civil society, medical advance, international cooperation and a high quality of political leadership. Demagogues and narcissists can win wars but pandemics can only be quashed by dedication and rationality. Pandemics expose weakness and encourage a questioning of those in power.

Black lives matter. The events of these past months are a reminder that progress is not linear and assured. Keeping silent when millions of people around the world have become eyewitnesses to a murder, is tantamount to complicity.

As in 1968, in 2020 Americans will be faced with a hard and defining choice.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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